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ABSTRACT

The nationwide problem of declining communication skills is evident in the large numbers of students entering college with deficiencies in reading, writing, and speaking skills. This paper discusses the operation of a communication skills program within a college communication skills center which functions as a supportive resource service and provides students with the basic communication tools for academic achievement and self-image improvement. The discussion focuses on reading, writing, and speech programs, as well as on the staffing of a center, on the selection of students for a skills program, and on the evaluation of a skills program. The paper concludes that the success of a communication skills center may be measured by the number of students completing the program, by the reduction in the college drop-out rate, and by the improvement in test scores of graduate students. (JM)

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A CENTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

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CS 202 870

A Center For Communications Skills

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INTRODUCTION

The need for a comprehensive program in communication skills is evident in the large number of students entering college from multicultural backgrounds with deficiencies in reading, writing and speaking skills. According to the Digest of Education Statistics (1975 edition) 22% of the entering freshman class at institutions of higher education in the fall of 1974 had high school grades ranging from D to C+. Colleges having an open admissions policy have a disproportionate number of students in this category.

The large number of students entering higher education with average or below average grades are experiencing a high drop out rate because of the inability to communicate on a satisfactory college achievement level. To increase the level of reading, writing and speaking, and therefore lower the drop out rate, a remediation center should be established, preferrably in a Library-Learning Center environment.

A Center for Communications Skills should function within the Library-Learning Center as a supportive resource service which seeks to aid the student with inadequate skills in reading, writing and speech through the utilization of proven and innovative techniques in education. As an integral part of the total academic program, a Center for Communication Skills should be designed to provide students with the basic tools which will facilitate academic

excellence and improve the self-image of the student.

Improving communicative skills requires comprehensive, individualized instruction and tutorial classroom setting consisting of a highly competitive environment. The Center for Communication Skills should be an integral, individualized, self-competitive, goal oriented instructional component of the Library-Learning Center offering both developmental and remedial programs.

To attack the problems previously mentioned, students with communicative skills deficiencies should be identified as early as possible. An ideal program would involve bringing skills deficient students on campus in the summer prior to beginning the freshman year of college and totally immersing them in one or more skills program(s) for the entire summer. This would necessitate expenditure of a considerable sum for housing of the students and for salaries for faculty and staff in the program. It would, however, enable the student to obtain a "head start" on developing the communication skills required to meet the academic demands of higher education. Any such program would require a cooperative and well-coordinated effort among counsellors, testing personnel, admissions staff and instructors and administrators in the Center for Communications Skills.

Programs within a Center for Communications Skills should be designed to supplement and complement existing courses offered by academic departments and be of benefit to the following students:

1. those requiring concentrated work in specific areas relevant to courses in which the student is enrolled.

2. those who need additional work on one or more skills.

3. those who wish to improve their knowledge of a specific course through the use of programmed instruction contained in learning packages.

4. those requiring memory drills (i.e. vocabulary) which may be more effectively taught with the assistance of audio-visual hardware and software.

OPERATION OF A PROGRAM FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

Reading

Prior to the beginning of classes each semester, a reading test should be administered to all incoming students. The results should be tabulated, interpreted and recorded on a student profile sheet. Conferences between students, counsellors and academic advisors should take place and a program of study for each student devised, based upon test results, the strengths and weakness in specific skills and his or her academic and non-academic interests. Specific goals for each student should be cooperatively drawn up at these conferences and he or she be informed that should the goal not be reached, it will be necessary to continue developing skills to successfully complete the goal until the requirements are met.

Programmed materials and texts should be provided by the Center with the exception of materials from his or her academic subjects. These materials should be designed at the various levels of instruction to meet the individual student's needs, thereby permitting operation of the program at maximum efficiency. This will involve reading instructors at the college devising their own learning packages with the assistance of media personnel and

instructional development specialists. The learning packages should consist of audio visual hardware, software, programmed assignments and educational objectives for each level of attainment.

To complement the reading program, additional skills should be emphasized. These should include: study habits, study techniques, listening and notetaking, retention and memory, studying a textbook, preparing for and taking examinations, problem solving, and library skills. As a motivational device, these skills may be taught in a course on a pass-fail basis for one or two credits.

Other possible courses complementing the reading program that could be of value to participants and to other students on a non-credit basis are speed reading and reading to criticize and evaluate. Speed reading would concentrate on and provide practice in skimming, scanning and surveying reading materials in the academic areas. Reading to criticize and evaluate would also involve concentration and practice in analyzing and criticizing materials from the various disciplines. Areas of emphasis would include: discriminating fact and opinion; recognizing bias and propaganda; and understanding tone and intent of the writing.

Constant evaluation of each student's progress must be made at each level of the program with all goals established on an individualized approach and basis.

Writing

A minimum of two general objectives should be established for a writing program:

(1) to equip students with those basic writing skills that will assist them in mastering college level courses involving writing;

(2) to develop the techniques involved in effective prose composition.

A writing program may consist of a minimum of two instructional facets. These are: mini-courses in writing, and writing laboratories. Instruction in each of these components should be individualized as far as possible to deal with specific deficiencies in grammar, mechanics of writing, and composition.

Additional components of the writing program may be offered for credit as a motivational device for enriching writing skills. Suggested components for one or two credits may be: (1) methods of research and writing; (2) library tools for research and writing. Both mini-courses would involve the cooperation of the academic departments, staff of the Writing Program, and staff of the library.

Speech

The major goal of a speech program may be to develop the speaking skills of participants with emphasis upon articulation, pronunciation, distinctness and audibility. Materials for the program should be composed of extracts from the various academic areas in which students are participating.

Instruction in speaking skills may use at least two approaches to instruction: (1) Individualized, in which the participant reads academic material aloud to a staff member. This should be done with the assistance of a tape recorder to permit the student to hear any inadequacies with the oral reading discussed after the reading. (2) Small group (which also should be recorded for later discussion) in which each student presents to the group an ex-

pository, informative and persuasive speech derived from either suggested topics or previously approved topics of his/her own choice. The purpose of this is to provide public speaking experience while developing articulation, pronunciation, distinctness and audibility.

To complement the speech program, mini-courses offered for credit may be provided in: (1) oral interpretation of literature; (2) conducting meetings; (3) the organization and presentation of communication.

All courses offered for credit should be designed so as not to duplicate or conflict with courses being offered by the various academic departments. To duplicate would be inefficient in faculty utilization and would also invite conflict between the Communication Skills Program and the departments affected.

Staffing a Center For Communications Skills

In addition to the administrative staff and specialists in reading, writing and speech, regular faculty may be borrowed when possible in a team teaching approach and for tutoring. Campus instructional development and media personnel should assist the Center in developing software for individualized learning packages. Library staff should assist in the development of library skills necessary for academic success. Counsellors should advise students at each level of the program and assist students in any conflicts that may arise.

The Director of the Center for Communications Skills should have the responsibility of coordinating the program. The position requires a learning generalist with teaching and administrative

background. The Director should have the academic qualifications and rank enabling him or her to work effectively with department chairmen and faculty members.

The previously mentioned staff should be assisted in their efforts by clerical personnel and laboratory assistants. Laboratory assistants may be appointed from among the ranks of graduate students or outstanding upper division undergraduates.

A credit bearing practicum may be established for those majoring in elementary and secondary education. These future teachers would gain invaluable experience and knowledge by tutoring on a one-to-one basis, and in working with the various types of hardware and software associated with the reading, writing and speech programs. The practicum could be offered as a course in education and would require coordination between that department and the Center in regards to hours, requirements of participation, and grading.

Determination of Participants

The nature of a program offered by a Center for Communication Skills requires the employment of a number of factors of selection for the program.

Determination of students who need to enter the program may be made by:

(1) high school records
(2) standardized test scores
(3) faculty referral
(4) self-referral

The rate of success in retention of those students with skill deficiencies leading to a high drop out rate is in large dependent upon the early identification of these deficiencies. The admissions office should notify the Center of those entering students with low

SAT scores, low high school grades or poor recommendations by high school counsellors. The Center should then make all arrangements for accepting the student in the program, and the administration and student so notified. Counselling services for the student should commence prior to his or her attendance at the institution and continue as long as needed throughout the students college career.

Standardized tests, such as the Sequential Tests of Educational Progress (STEP) Series, McGraw-Hill Tests in Reading (Form A), Vocabulary (Form A) and Writing Test (Form A) or others, should be given all entering students and referrals made to the Center as a result of these examinations.

Faculty should be permitted to refer students they feel are deficient in a skill area to the Center. This referral should make student attendance in the program mandatory.

Any student wishing to strengthen one or more skills should be permitted voluntary attendance in the program.

Evaluation of the Program

Since any program must be adjusted to meet the need of its participants, and determine its degree of success or failure, a variety of instruments should be employed for its evaluation. Those instruments may include:

(1) Student surveys assessing the program, conducted through oral interviews with staff members of the Center. The surveys should include assessment of the content of the Program, the benefit of the Program to the student, and the effectiveness of the various staff members working with the student.

(2) Progress charts maintained by students and periodically checked by staff.

(3) Standardized tests evaluating levels of progress.

(4) Staff prepared tests of skill levels after a specific skill has been re-enforced.

(5) Pre- and - post - test results compared at the beginning and end of the program.

(6) Staff evaluation of the Center's program based upon the several evaluative instruments employed.

CONCLUSION

The success of the Center for Communication Skills may be measured by the number of students completing the program, a reduction of the college drop-out rate, and in the improvement of scores of graduates taking the Graduate Record Exam, Medical College Aptitude Test, Law School Aptitude Test and others.

With the success of the program, any academic stigma attached to students attending the Center should recede, if not disappear altogether.

The problem of declining communications skills is severe and nationwide. Failure to effectively deal with it will promote the academic decline of higher education. The inability to read, write and speak on a level acceptable to higher education among high school graduates mandates that until such time as the elementary and secondary schools produce graduates able to cope with communications skills, the college, in order to provide for the needs of its students, must assume an ever-increasing role in teaching students basic skills.

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